

RESEARCH SUMMARY



*International Baccalaureate learner profile:
A comparative study of implementation, adaptation
and outcomes in India, Australia and Hong Kong*

Based on a research report prepared for the IB by:

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Background

This study provides an assessment of the learner profile (LP) component of the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum within the Diploma Programme (DP) from a comparative and cross-cultural context. The LP consists of a list of 10 attributes of learning designed to promote a value system leading to the development of learners who are both academically well-prepared and “internationally minded”. These attributes suggest that IB students should aspire to be: inquirers, knowledgeable, thinkers, communicators, principled, open-minded, caring, risk-takers, balanced and reflective. The LP represents the distinctive approach of the IB to pedagogy across each of its programmes—the Primary Years Programme (PYP), the Middle Years Programme (MYP) and the DP. This approach is designed to respond to the challenges of learning and citizenship in the 21st century, producing learners who are able to engage effectively with the processes of rapid social change, cultural diversity and the realities of global interconnectedness and interdependence.

This study explores some of the ways in which the LP attributes are interpreted, adapted and implemented in the DP across three sites with significantly different cultural traditions—India, Hong Kong and Australia. It seeks to identify some of the outcomes of the LP, discusses the challenges

IB World Schools confront in implementing the LP and recommends strategies for addressing them.

Research design

Researchers from the University of Melbourne examined how the LP attributes are understood and implemented in nine schools, three each in Hong Kong, India and Australia. After preliminary deliberations based on the emerging literature about the LP, two survey tools were developed. The first examined student awareness and understanding of the LP attributes in order to compare these across sites ($n = 506$). The second explored teacher understanding and opinions with respect to the LP and its implementation at each of the schools ($n = 140$). The survey included Likert-style questions, while also providing an opportunity for respondents to include qualitative information through open-ended responses. The surveys were used principally to develop protocols for qualitative interviews and focus group discussions and to inform site visits. Using these data sources, the study provides an interpretive account of the ways in which the LP has been implemented in the schools, has been adapted to diverse cultural contexts and has contributed to certain outcomes.

Following is a list of the nine schools that took part in this study.

Country	Acronym	School type	Year levels	IB programme offered
Hong Kong (A)	HKA	International school	Years 11 and 12	DP
Hong Kong (B)	HKB	Private Independent school	Preparatory level to year 12	MYP, DP
Hong Kong (C)	HKC	Private boys' school	Preparatory level to year 12	DP
India (A)	INA	International school	Preparatory level to year 12	PYP, DP
India (B)	INB	International school	Preparatory level to year 12	PYP, MYP, DP
India (C)	INC	Independent boarding school	Years 11 and 12	DP
Australia (A)	AUA	Steiner school	Preparatory level to year 12	DP in years 11 and 12
Australia (B)	AUB	Catholic secondary school	Preparatory level to year 12	PYP, MYP, DP
Australia (C)	AUC	Private girls' school	Preparatory level to year 12	DP in years 11 and 12

Table 1. List and description of participating schools

Findings

Perspectives on the learner profile

The data collected for this study pointed to the existence of three broadly intersecting but distinct ways in which the LP was understood across the participating schools. The first and most basic of these revealed an understanding of the LP as knowledge to be acquired by students—something to be learned. The second highlighted the LP as influencing the practices of learning. The third emphasized the LP as a particular learner identity. Each of these different ways of engaging with the LP—learned, learning and learner—illustrated a distinct understanding of its purpose. All three of these interpretations were present at all schools. However, it was the co-existence of interpretations that underpinned difficulties in understanding the LP within schools. While most teachers and students in the study were supportive of the concept of the LP, there were a range of opinions about the purpose of the LP and diverse views about the meaning of the individual attributes. Moreover, teachers and students expressed uncertainty about the construction of the list of attributes and why this set of attributes was chosen rather than another. Lastly, there was debate about whether the attributes were relevant and assessable at the DP level.

Teacher perspectives

As suggested in figure 1, findings indicated that there was broad support among teachers for the principles underlying the LP in each of the three countries. However, the level of teacher understanding of these principles was uneven, resulting in strong commitment to the LP among some teachers and a degree of confusion among others. Some teachers viewed the LP as a framework of academic and moral attributes that mark the IB's distinctive approach to pedagogy. Other teachers connected the LP to the idea of international-mindedness. There were also different levels of understanding of the LP between international and local teachers, as well as teachers with experience with the PYP and MYP and those without.

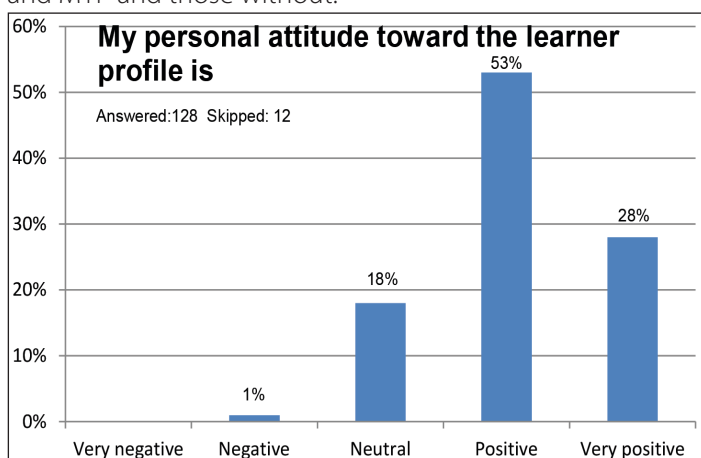


Figure 1. Frequency graph on teacher attitudes toward the learner profile (n = 128)

Student perspectives

For most of the students, the main purpose of the LP was ethical—to become globally aware and to recognize our shared humanity. They seldom viewed the LP in terms of its focus on intellectual attributes, such as “knowledgeable”, “inquirers” and “thinkers”, which they invariably took for granted. As they approach their tertiary studies, many DP students appreciated the relevance of the LP to their future academic and career endeavours. A student in Australia summed up the long-term value of the LP:

“I don't think we will realise the full value of the LP and IB until many years from now. The LP attributes are not always for now, but for the rest of your life.”
(AUB student)

However, students in all nine schools repeatedly raised the issue of time pressure and the intense focus on examinations within the DP, leading some to question whether it is realistic to expect the LP to play a significant role in the programme. For example, they pointed to a contradiction between the IB conceptualization of the LP and the rigorous DP curriculum and examination requirements. Many students felt that more time within the curriculum should be allocated for them to think about and reflect on the attributes.

Furthermore, a number of students in this study were largely unfamiliar with the LP attributes, despite schools displaying the attributes on posters and some teachers reporting that they reference the attributes in class discussions. Understandably, the students who were introduced to the LP attributes during the PYP or MYP had a much more elaborate understanding of the purposes of the LP than those whose experiences of the IB were limited to the DP.

Student and teacher perspectives on individual learner profile attributes

Teachers and students offered the following viewpoints regarding the individual attributes of the LP.

- **Risk taker:** Being a risk-taker was one of the attributes that many students struggled with. For example, students in a Hong Kong school expressed concern that being a risk-taker was disrespectful to their teachers and family and did not serve their educational aims. Among some groups of people and in some circumstances, risk-taking may be highly valued, while in other situations it may be viewed as inappropriate.

- **Communicator:** “Communicator” was positioned as an attribute that could challenge traditional Chinese values, as one Hong Kong student attested:

“In our school, communicator is usually tied with the profile [attribute] of being a risk-taker. After all, this is a predominantly Chinese focused culture where we don’t really want to offend people with our own personal opinions.” (HKA student)

- **Principled:** Being principled raised some concerns, this time in potential conflict with traditional academic values aimed at obtaining high grades. Australian students seemed to have some difficulty in grasping what being principled was intended to mean and preferred words such as ethical or responsible.
- **Inquirer:** “Inquirer” was another attribute that drew mixed reviews. Certain students felt being an inquirer could at times conflict with more traditional Chinese school-based values by distracting the focus of a lesson from specific academic goals. Conversely, one student believed that being an inquirer “means that you look into things more deeply” and other students considered inquiry as central to learning.
- **Knowledgeable:** “Knowledgeable” was also perceived as a problematic attribute, especially by students. Several students expressed the notion that to be knowledgeable was an outcome of learning, not learning itself.
- **Thinker:** Akin to knowledgeable, some students found the attribute “thinker” to be superfluous, as thinking is a continuously enacted activity. The attribute became more highly valued, however, when a specific sense of thinking was introduced. One such sense was that of metacognition. A further way in which thinking can be specified is critical thinking, which one Indian student identified particularly with the DP:

“Being a critical thinker is what separates an IB student from other students. What I really like about [the] IB is that we are taught to think holistically, we are taught to think outside of the box and we are taught to think by asking questions. We don’t just take what we are being told. We hear what we are told, we think about it, and then we come up with our own conclusions and that’s what I think the perfect IB student is. So instead of thinker it should be critical thinker.” (INC student)

- **Open-minded:** Being open-minded was considered by many students and teachers to be one of the most important attributes. It seemed to suggest a sense of international-mindedness, which is a cornerstone of the IB approach. Further, being open-minded was perceived to be an important attribute, particularly for students and staff at an international school.
- **Balanced, caring, reflective:** The three remaining attributes were not prominently raised by students or teachers through the interviews conducted in this study. When they were mentioned, the attributes were largely seen as linked to creativity, action, service (CAS) activities.

LP diversity versus uniformity

The study findings suggest that school leaders perceived a tension between *diversity* and *uniformity* in the promotion of the LP across the IB’s network of schools. On the one hand, a system-wide focus on the LP implies a degree of uniformity of understanding and practice while, on the other hand, diversity is encouraged in schools and classrooms across different cultural and national settings. Some schools viewed this tension as a hurdle to overcome, while others celebrate the diversity of interpretations, framing it as a productive tension that is part of the richness of the IB’s global approach. At the same time, the researchers noted that tension between diversity and uniformity can be unproductive if not managed carefully, as it may compromise the integrity of the LP as a pedagogic innovation. In short, productive tensions were suggested as something to be celebrated, whereas problematic tensions should be identified and addressed.

Recommendations

While productive tensions were seen as beneficial, the findings also suggest disagreement among schools concerning how the LP attributes should be integrated into the DP curriculum. For instance, while there was wide acknowledgment of the connection between the LP and the core (theory of knowledge, CAS and the extended essay), there was less clarity about how the LP should be integrated into subject groups. Indeed, some teachers and students viewed the LP as an additional burden, particularly given the perception that the DP is already overloaded with curricular requirements.

As many teachers appeared unclear about how best to integrate the LP attributes within curriculum and opportunities to discuss the relevance of the LP to all learning areas within the DP are rare, the researchers pointed to a need for greater teacher preparation and professional development.

Taking into account these and other issues, the University of Melbourne researchers provided the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1

IB World Schools should consider providing both teachers and DP students who are new to the IB with a more effective orientation to the LP. Schools should also encourage regular discussions about the role of the LP in developing independent and effective learners who are able to negotiate the future demands of tertiary studies and the changing world of work.

Recommendation 2

IB World Schools should be dissuaded from regarding the current list of LP attributes as complete. Instead, schools should be encouraged to view the list as a pedagogic tool to help students explore the meaning and significance of learning attributes in relation to both local traditions and contexts and the requirements of an increasingly globalizing society.

Recommendation 3

The IB should commission a discussion paper that addresses directly the challenges presented by the competitive academic character of the DP to the integrity of the LP, focusing on the contrasting pedagogical demands made on teachers and students.

Recommendation 4

IB World Schools should provide additional support in the form of teacher workshops and professional development activities around the significance of the LP and its implementation within the DP, together with increased opportunities for international teacher exchange.

Recommendation 5

Recognizing that there is a perennial tension between diversity and uniformity in most attempts at curriculum reform, the IB should view the various conceptual and practical tensions surrounding the LP as productive, encouraging schools to promote robust conversations about the ways in which the meaning and significance of the LP can be locally interpreted and implemented without compromising its core aims.

Recommendation 6

In view of the dynamic cultural shifts taking place around the world, the IB should explore how the LP attributes might be used to encourage students at the DP level to think about and critically reflect on the ways in which their academic and career prospects will increasingly reside in transnational spaces.

This summary was developed by the IB Research Department. A copy of the full report is available at www.ibo.org/research. For more information on this study or other IB research, please email research@ibo.org.

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